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DISCUSSION OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND SANITATION

THE TENEMENT HOUSE DEPARTMENT

JOHN J. MURPHY

Commissioner of the Tenement House Department

ABOUT fifteen years ago it was recognized that the multiple dwelling problem in the city of New York was growing to such proportions as to need particular treatment. From 1867, when the first tenement house laws were placed on the statute books, up to 1900, the enforcement of such laws was divided among a number of city departments. The department of health had many of them, the bureau of buildings some, the fire department some, the police department some, and as usually happens when there is a division of responsibility, it was found that there was a waste of effort and considerable non-enforcement of the law. Accordingly, the tenement house commission concluded that the best way to solve the problem was by creating a special department into whose care should be committed practically the entire regulation of multiple dwellings. If you want to understand the precise position which the tenement house department occupies in the municipal scheme, you must get the legal definition of a tenement house and not the colloquial use of the term. A tenement house in New York is "any building or part thereof which is occupied as the residence of three families or more living independently of each other and doing their own cooking on the premises." It includes apartment houses, flat houses and all other houses of similar character. The size of the problem in New York may be judged from the fact that we have to-day one hundred four thousand recognized, legal tenement houses occupied by about four and a quarter millions of population. The work of the tenement house department is in a sense almost as simple as the work of the health department as described to you by Dr. Goldwater is complex. Its work is to attempt to prevent evil conditions by operating in three directions—structural, sanitary and sociological.

We have jurisdiction over the erection of all new multiple dwellings. All plans for new multiple dwellings or tenement houses have to be submitted to the tenement house department for examination as to light, ventilation, fireproofing, fire egress, and sanitation, before the plans are forwarded to the bureau of buildings for its action. During the process of erection every new building is continually inspected by

inspectors of the tenement house department for those particular things, but not in relation to materials of construction. This is the matter concerning which you have heard so much recently, conflict of jurisdiction and multiple inspections. As a matter of fact, the tenement house inspection does not take into account any of the things inspected by the bureau of buildings, nor does the bureau of buildings take into account any of the things inspected by the tenement house department.

In one direction only can we judge with certainty how effective our work has been,—that is, in the matter of fire protection. We have now twenty-four thousand new-law tenements, as they are called, in the city of New York. We have never lost a single life by fire in any one of those buildings, which is fair evidence of the efficiency with which the fire protection provisions of the law have been carried out. As you realize, it is frequently much easier to get a law enacted than it is to get it enforced. I would not in this presence refer to the death rate and the reduction in death rate as an illustration of the work of the tenement house department—though it is a testimony to the efficiency of our work,—because, of course, it merely shares with other departments whatever credit may be due. Dr. Goldwater compiles the figures and we try to keep them down as low as possible.

The next object of our work is the alteration of old buildings, to make them conform to a fair sanitary standard. From almost 1830 up to 1900 tenement houses of many kinds, nearly all bad, were being constructed in New York. The houses were chiefly of two types: first, the railroad flat, which ran through solid without any light shaft whatever; and second, the dumb-bell type, which provided a very narrow shaft giving practically no light and little ventilation to the lower rooms of the building. In some buildings we found on either side six rooms—that is, twelve rooms on a floor,—of which only the front and rear rooms got any direct light or ventilation, the four inside rooms being absolutely dark except for such artificial lighting as might be provided. To outlaw these buildings was impossible; so the law required windows to be put into the partitions dividing those rooms from the light rooms, front and rear, thus providing some slight measure of light and ventilation. These things have been done. While we started out with a census of about three hundred seventy-five thousand wholly dark or inadequately lighted rooms, the number on the last report to me was less than ten thousand in the whole city of New York. We found the only sanitary accommodation for over ten thousand tenement houses to be school sinks in the yards. There is not a single tenement house in operation in the city of New York to-day dependent on a school sink.

We get about 40,000 complaints a year from occupants of tenement houses. About 20% have not sufficient basis to justify a complaint. All are examined, whether signed or anonymous. It is the custom among some landlords, especially in the poorer houses, if tenants complain about conditions on the premises, to serve them with a notice to quit. Hence all complaints sent in to the department are held confidential.

A big division of our work is the continuous observation of the sanitary condition of buildings, the removal of rubbish from cellars, the keeping of fire-escapes clear so that they may be properly used. It seems almost incredible, but there are thousands of people in New York who do not know what a fire-escape is on the building for. They think it is an additional store-room, or a balcony upon which the children may play so as to save them from the dangers of the street. We frequently find hatchways in fire-escapes closed by planking cut to measure and fastened down with wire, so that an inspector must spend fifteen or twenty minutes to remove it. It certainly is not possible that anyone who knows the purpose of a fire-escape would voluntarily run the risk that that kind of thing involves. Thanks to the active co-operation of Police Commissioner Woods, that evil has been much reduced during the past year. I am glad to say that I think the condition of the fire-escapes of New York, as to both structural conditions and freedom from obstructions, is better than at any time previous in its history.

The work of the department has gone on with a constantly lessening budget. Last year we were able to reduce our working force by sixty-three. Accordingly, we were able to make a return of about eight per cent of our entire appropriation to the city. Our work naturally diminishes as the old buildings are altered to conform with the requirements of the law as it stands.

As long as the city must assume responsibility for the care and disposition of its human deficients (whether such persons be deficient morally, physically or economically), it is clearly a matter of prudence that it should try to insure itself against constantly mounting charges for charities, correction and protective services by insisting that housing conditions shall not be permitted which tend to debilitate the citizen and render him liable to become a public charge.

The appropriation for the maintenance of the tenement house department may therefore be regarded entirely as insurance; apart from the humanitarian considerations which enter into the saving of lives from destruction by disease and fire, the work of the department tends in other ways effectively to diminish crime and vice.